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SUBJECT: MGLE01--AMBASSADOR'S FIRST MEETING WITH FOREIGN  
MINISTER-DESIGNATE FAWZI SALLOUKH

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)  
and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In his first meeting with the Ambassador, Fawzi Salloukh on 7/25 highlighted his long friendship with the United States, promised an open dialogue between the two countries, and tried to put a good face on future Lebanon-Syrian relations. Salloukh, a Shia from southern Lebanon, described foreign fighters in Iraq as "terrorists" who had to be stopped. But he dodged taking a government position on UNSCR 1559 before the ministerial declaration of policy is published as early as July 26. He accepted, in principle, the Secretary's recent invitation (offered in the course of the Secretary's press conference in Beirut on 7/22) to visit the United States. End summary.

12. (C) Fawzi Salloukh, the newly designated Minister for Foreign Affairs, received the Ambassador and Pol Chief cordially on 7/25 on their first official call. The Secretary's visit to Beirut dominated the first part of the conversation with the Ambassador. While hinting that such visits should properly be coordinated through the MFA, Salloukh noted that he was pleased with the Secretary's trip and flattered by her invitation to visit the United States. Although the Minister-designate was unsure when he might travel to the U.S., he said that the UNGA might be a good opportunity to take up the invitation of the Secretary. He said that the Secretary's messages to Lebanon were clear and well understood, including on the need for Lebanon to accept its international obligations (e.g., UNSCR 1559). He looked forward to close cooperation with the USG and with the Embassy. Describing himself as "a conservative diplomat," Salloukh acknowledged that secrecy, and departures from traditional procedures, were necessary at times. The Secretary's visit to Lebanon was such an occasion. He reassured the Ambassador, however, that he was discreet and that matters discussed with the Ministry would not find their way into the press.

13. (C) Turning to the present border troubles with Syria, the Foreign Minister-designate tried to sound hopeful. "We will attack our Syrian neighbors with love," he said. Prime Minister-designate Fouad Siniora had already agreed to take up the border closings with the Syrian government as soon as the government received its vote of confidence this week. Salloukh added that, as a farmer from the south of Lebanon, he was suffering from the loss of trade that has hit many Lebanese business people. He has a personal interest in solving the crisis with Syria. But Salloukh stopped short of requesting international assistance in the border issue. He said Lebanon would be grateful if its friends allowed the Lebanese to define their relations with Syria. He said he would work with love and respect to win over the Syrians. When the Ambassador pointed out that Syria had never reciprocated Lebanon's kindly affections, the Minister-designate asked that the new government be given a chance to redefine its relationship with Syria before the international community passes judgment.

14. (C) Salloukh said he thought the recently-named

government would receive a vote of confidence from the Parliament in the coming week. In the meantime, the designated ministers had been meeting over the weekend to come up with a policy statement and a list of priorities for the new government. Salloukh was adamant that he could not discuss the statement in detail, but he said the government would seek a program of social, political, and administrative reforms to address Lebanon's pressing needs. Salloukh said the document should be ready after a final ministerial meeting on the evening of July 25. Addressing UNSCR 1559, the Foreign Minister-designate said the most important portions of the resolution were fulfilled. What remained was an internal issue to be solved by the Lebanese in a Lebanese fashion. At the same time, Lebanon was mindful of its international obligations.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador outlined the activities of the 6/13 core group meeting in Paris and potential follow-on support. Explaining that the Paris meeting would be followed up by a Beirut meeting of the core group, the Ambassador stressed that the core group would only proceed with assistance plans for Lebanon in partnership with the GOL and in accordance with GOL priorities. The Minister-designate said that his government was grateful for the work done in Paris and looked forward to participating in a Beirut meeting in the future. Lebanon, Salloukh said, has many needs. The debt burden which weighs on the Lebanese economy precludes the GOL taking action on many of these needs. He said Lebanon would not be confronting donors with a "shopping list" of development needs, but is willing to participate in a real dialogue with partners for the good of the Lebanese people.

¶6. (S) The Ambassador used the occasion to present to the Minister-designate reftel (b) demarche concerning UNSCR 1546 and the infiltration of foreign fighters into Iraq. The Minister-designate became solemn and noted sadly the innocent lives lost in Iraq as a result of these "terrorists." He acknowledged that Lebanese are among the foreign fighters. He said that his government believes that this infiltration must be stopped. Salloukh accepted the demarche and promised to study it carefully. He added that he hoped that the multi-national force in Iraq would soon be able to finish its work and leave the country. The Minister-designate said he knew that the USG was paying a high price for its involvement in Iraq and did not relish the thought of staying any longer than necessary.

¶7. (C) Comment: Foreign Minister-designate Salloukh's use of the word "terrorist" to describe foreign fighters in Iraq is a welcome first among Lebanese officials. As a Shia intellectual, he might feel more sharply than other Lebanese about the suffering of Shia civilians at the hands of terrorists in Iraq. Salloukh was one of the Shia Ministers selected by the Amal/Hizballah political alliance in assembling the new Cabinet. In his first meeting with the Ambassador, the Minister-designate showed off a picture of himself with retired Ambassador Thomas Pickering, and repeatedly recalled his friendly relations with American diplomats over his years of diplomatic service that stretched from his first posting in Liberia in the early 1960's to his Ambassadorship in Brussels in the mid-1990s. The meeting was pleasant enough, with Salloukh careful not to contradict Lebanon's obligations under UNSCR 1559. The meeting was also largely rhetoric-free, with Salloukh not bothering with his predecessor's frequent references to the suffering of the Palestinians. Yet Salloukh did not show any sparks of creativity, initiative, or charisma. What the MFA really needs is an engaging character who can break its "branch office" relationship with the Syrian MFA. We should not expect much from a Salloukh-led MFA. End comment.

FELTMAN